

## Chapter 10

### The Feudal Relationship

Feudalism in its more refined form was born of the chaos caused by the Viking invasions, internal disputes, and poor leadership, which together contributed to the destruction of Charlemagne's empire. As central authority (in the person of the king) collapsed, there evolved ather naturally a system of decentralized rule in which the most important nobles of the realm (lords) protected their own regional holdings by contracting with lesser nobles (vassals) who fought for them. This involved an expression of homage, in which the vassal promised fealty (loyalty) to the lord. In return, the vassal was usually granted a fief (parcel of land) from which he derived an income and, depending on the size of his land holdings, some measure of prestige. The vassal, in turn, might have other vassals pledged to himself in a hierarchy of support. This process was called subinfeudation and became quite complex since vassals could contract with several lords at once. In that case, one's ultimate fealty belonged to the original or most important noble, called the liege lord.

Feudalism, then, is the political, military, and legal relationship between a lord and a vassal. It had existed rather informally since the later Roman Empire, but became more sophisticated and widespread during the ninth century as the Viking invasions demanded some form of defense. The lords provided the leadership, the vassals composed the army, and the people sought the protection of such regional strong-men. In return for this protection, the free peasant often gave up his land and labored on the fief of a noble for a specified amount of time. The peasant thus became a serf and was responsible for the production and upkeep of the lord's manor. The social, economic, and legal relationship between a serf and a member of the fighting nobility for whom he worked is called manorialism. The following selections represent various aspects of medieval feudalism.

---

#### *Legal Rules for Military Service*<sup>1</sup>

##### KING LOUIS IX

The baron and all vassals of the king are bound to appear before him when he shall summon them, and to serve him at their own expense for forty days and forty nights, with as many knights as each one owes; and he is able to extract from them these services when he wishes and when he has need of them. And if the king wishes to keep them more than forty days at their own expense, they are not bound to remain if they do not wish it. And if the king wishes to keep them at his expense for the defense of the realm, they are bound to remain. And if the king wishes to lead them outside of the kingdom, they need not go unless they wish to, for they have already served their forty days and forty nights.

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward P. Cheyney, ed., *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, vol. 4, pt. 3 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1897) p. 30

## *Liege Homage*<sup>2</sup>

I, John of Toul, make known that I am the liege man of the lady Beatrice, countess of Troyes, and of her son, Theobald, count of Champagne, against every creature, living or dead, save my allegiance to lord Enjorand of Coucy, lord John of Arcis, and the count of Grandpre. If it should happen that the count of Grandpre should be at war with the countess and count of Champagne on his own quarrel, I will aid the count of Grandpre in my own person, and will send to the count and countess of Champagne the knights whose service I owe to them for the fief which I hold of them. But if the count of Grandpre shall make war on the countess and the count of Champagne on behalf of his friends and not in his own quarrel, I will aid in my own person the countess and count of Champagne, and will send one knight to the count of Grandpre for the service which I owe him for the fief which I hold of him, but I will not go myself into the territory of the count of Grandpre to make war on him.

### CONSIDER THIS:

- Define feudalism.
- What conditions contributed to the rise of this system? Be specific in citing appropriate sources.
- How does homage differ from liege homage?
- What were some of the obligations of a vassal to his lord?

---

## *Restraint of Feudal Violence: The Truce of God (1063)*<sup>3</sup>

Feudalism was a system of governance that dealt well with crisis and chaos. When invaders approached, the lord called his vassals into service (levy), and the enemy was engaged. Feudalism and manorialism regularized life and afforded security in an otherwise insecure age. Therefore, these systems were maintained even during times of peace. But vassals were trained to fight and became restless when they were not "employed." Disputes between lords broke out frequently and often resulted in bloodshed and the destruction of property. Tournaments, where knights (vassals) could display their manly prowess in a somewhat controlled atmosphere, were developed to channel the destructive energy of these nobles. In this respect, the laws of chivalry and the Crusades kept regional peace and directed hostility away from Europe and toward the infidel Muslims in the Holy Land. The church went further, attacking the problem of aggression by establishing laws of conduct since called the "Truce of God." Note the church's acceptance of trial by ordeal and what it entailed.

---

Drogo, bishop of Terouanne, and count Baldwin [of Hainault] have established this peace with the cooperation of the clergy and people of the land.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Thatcher and Edgar McNeal, eds., *A Source Book of Medieval History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905) pp. 364-365

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Thatcher and Edgar McNeal, eds., *A Source Book of Medieval History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905) pp. 417-418

1 Dearest brothers in the Lord, these are the conditions which you must observe during the  
2 time of the peace which is commonly called the truce of God, and which begins with sunset on  
3 Wednesday and lasts until sunrise on Monday.

- 4 1. During those four days and five nights no man or woman shall assault, wound, or slay  
5 another, or attack, seize, or destroy a castle, burg, or villa, by craft or by violence.
- 6 2. If anyone violates this peace and disobeys these commands of ours, he shall be exiled for  
7 thirty years as a penance, and before he leaves the bishopric he shall make compensation  
8 for the injury which he committed. Otherwise he shall be excommunicated by the Lord  
9 God and excluded from all Christian fellowship.
- 10 3. All who associate with him in any way, who give him advice or aid, or converse with  
11 him, unless it be to advise him to do penance and to leave the bishopric, shall be under  
12 excommunication until they have made satisfaction.
- 13 4. If any violator of the peace shall fall sick and die before he completes his penance, no  
14 Christian shall visit him or move his body from the place where it lay, or receive any of  
15 his possessions.
- 16 5. In addition, brethren, you should observe the peace in regard to lands and animals and all  
17 things that can be possessed. If anyone takes from another an animal, a coin, or a  
18 garment, during the days of the truce, he shall be excommunicated unless he makes  
19 satisfaction . . . .
- 20 6. During the days of the peace, no one shall make a hostile expedition on horseback, except  
21 when summoned by the count; and all who go with the count shall take for their support  
22 only as much as is necessary for themselves and their horses.
- 23 7. All merchants and other men who pass through your territory from other lands shall have  
24 peace from you.
- 25 8. You shall also keep this peace every day of the week from the beginning of Advent to the  
26 octave of Epiphany and from the beginning of Lent to the octave of Easter, and from the  
27 feast of Rogations [the Monday before Ascension Day] to the octave of Pentecost.
- 28 9. We command all priests on feast days and Sundays to pray for all who keep the peace,  
29 and to curse all who violate it or support its violators.
- 30 10. If anyone has been accused of violating the peace and denies the charge, he shall take the  
31 communion and undergo the ordeal of hot iron. If he is found guilty, he shall do penance  
32 within the bishopric for seven years.

### 33 34 *Ordeal of Hot Iron*

35  
36 After the accusation has been lawfully made, and three days have been passed in fasting  
37 and prayer, the priest, clad in his sacred vestments with the exception of his outside garment,  
38 shall take with a tongs the iron placed before the altar; and, singing the hymn of three youths,  
39 namely, "Bless him all his works," he shall bear it to the fire, and shall say this prayer over the  
40 place where fire is to carry out the judgment: "Bless, O Lord God, this place, that there may be  
41 for us in it sanctity, chastity, virtue and victory, and sanctimony, humility, goodness, gentleness  
42 and plenitude of law, and obedience to God the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost." After  
43 this, the iron shall be placed in the fire and shall be sprinkled with holy water; and while it is  
44 heating, he shall celebrate mass. But when the priest shall have taken the Eucharist, he shall  
45 adjure the man who is to be tried ... and shall cause him to take the communion. Then the priest

1 shall sprinkle holy water above the iron and all say: "The blessing of God the Father, the Son,  
2 and the Holy Ghost descend upon this iron for the discerning of the right judgment of God." And  
3 straightway the accused shall carry the iron to a distance of nine feet. Finally his hand shall be  
4 covered under seal for three days, and if festering blood be found in the track of the iron, he shall  
5 be judged guilty. But if, however, he shall go forth uninjured, praise shall be rendered to God.

6  
7 **CONSIDER THIS:**

- 8 • What was the purpose of the Truce of God?
- 9 • What in particular were some of the penalties for breaking the peace?
- 10 • Describe the "ordeal of hot iron." Why did the church sanction such a trial?